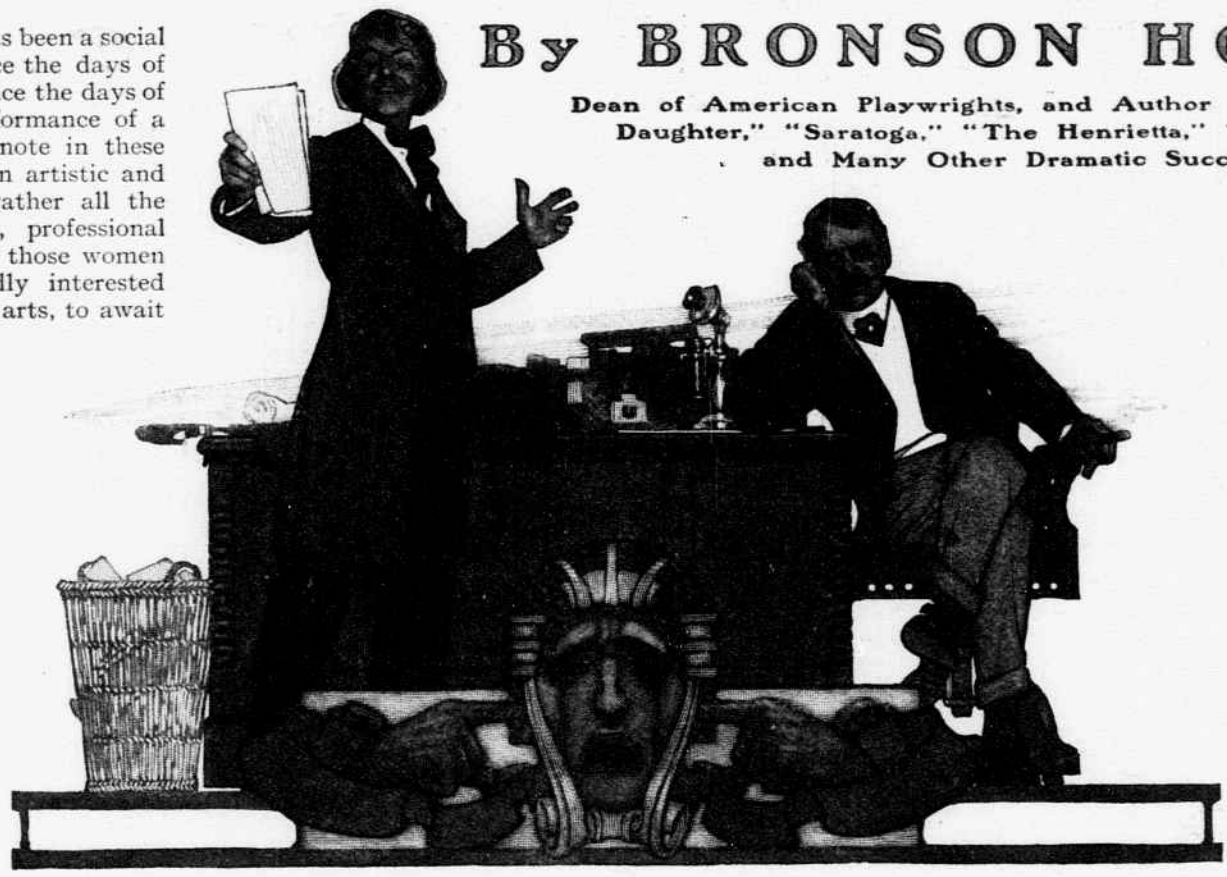
THEATRICAL PREMIERS

"First Nights" in London and New-York

By BRONSON HOWARD

Dean of American Playwrights, and Author of "The Banker's Daughter," "Saratoga," "The Henrietta," "Shenandoah" and Many Other Dramatic Successes



THE theatrical premier has been a social function in Paris since the days of Molière; in London since the days of Shakespeare. The first performance of a play by any dramatist of note in these cities has been and still is an artistic and critical reunion at which gather all the well-known men in artistic, professional and journalistic circles, all those women of society who are avowedly interested in literature and the other arts, to await with interest the success or failure of the latest product of the dramatist's pen. The difficulty and uncertainty which attach to the popular success of a play always invest such occasions with a deep interest born of suspense as to the result; and the premier has thus become an established institution showing no falling off in public interest as the years have passed. And many of these evenings have been of great historical interest, marking as they have done the transitional periods in the evolution of the drama.

It is only within the last twenty-five or thirty years that a comparison has become possible between these conditions abroad and the first-night gatherings in our own country; for the reason that prior to that time there was no really American drama. There were a few American plays; but their productions did not assume the least importance as social events.

My first play, "Saratoga," was produced thirty-five years ago—in December, 1870—and is now in the seventh year of the renewal of the copyright. On the first night of this play the audience made it an immediate success by its enthusiasm, calling the curtains vociferously, calling all the actors and the manager; but no one in the theater apparently ever thought of calling the author. Four years after (1874) I was called out before the curtain for a piece which was a failure.

When a new English drama or translation or adaptation from the French had its initial performance in New-York, curiosity and interest were naturally aroused, and a crowded house was the result; but in no sense could such an audience be regarded as the critical and notable assemblage which gathers abroad on similar occasions. Now, however, New-York is beginning to take its place among the world's capitals in this regard, and its first nights are coming to have a character of their own.

There are differences between American and English first-night audiences which are exceedingly striking. The rights of the individual here in America to pursue his avocation unmolested grew strong before the public had any opportunity to consider this question as between play and public and the public's right to interrupt or disapprove. But the English habit of interrupting a play by the expression of personal opinions, of hissing, hooting, booing and otherwise, grew and became traditional long before the modern ideas of personal rights were firmly established. All the history we have of riots in the theater shows that the people thought they had in some undefined way a property right in the theater, though they did not claim that right in any other species of private property. Even if they felt themselves cheated in a shop by goods not worth what was paid for them they regarded it as a matter of law between the seller and the buyer, and never dreamed that they had the right to correct the wrong or to express their indignation by threats of personal violence affecting the shopkeeper's business. The same state of things exists in England to-day. The most conservative men will argue seriously that the audience has a right in the theater to correct what it considers abuses of any kind immediately and on the spot without an appeal to law.

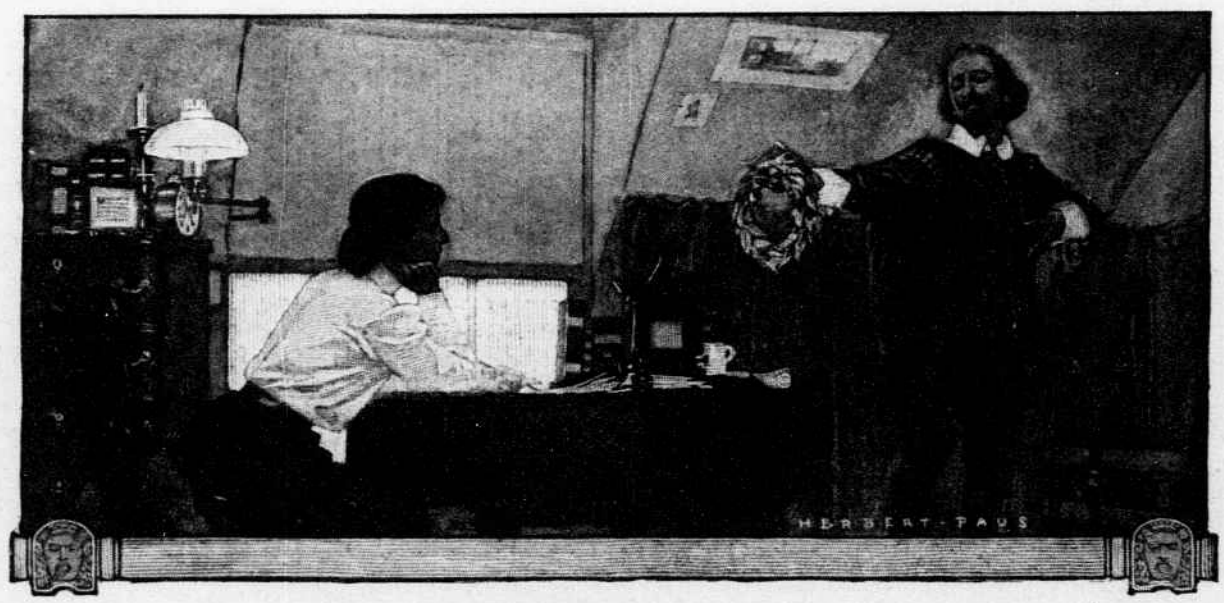
The difference in America could not be illustrated more forcibly than by the facts of the memorable Astor Place riots. When the people, intensely excited, tried to interfere with the appearance of Macready, the Seventh Regiment was called out and many citizens were killed in defense of Macready's personal right to appear and of his manager's personal right to present him. Incidentally—a larger and broader principle growing out of a smaller one—this violent defense of personal rights established the first precedent for dealing with a mob violently but legitimately by our Republican Government.

Up to that time there had been a great deal of discussion as to the manner in which under our form of government a mob should be dealt with. Of course we had the general law about reading the riot act and shooting over people's heads with blank cartridges. After the Astor Place disturbances the State of New-York went so far as to pass a law making it illegal to give a mob warning by reading the riot act, and making it a criminal offense to order an armed force to shoot at all, except with ball cartridge and the gun aimed directly at the mob. Practically this has become the practice and manner of dealing with mobs in all parts of the country. From this one can see how deeply rooted is the opposition in America to any interference with personal rights and personal privileges in a theater. It is not a matter of mere indifference.

If I may speak of a lesser matter after giving the fundamental principle: there has been no opportunity for the growth of the European system here, because before we began to take an interest in original productions the pit had disappeared from the American theater and the gallery had practically gone with it. However much some people in our audiences may want their indignation expressed, they have in our own theaters no pit and gallery to express it for them, and I doubt whether the stalls and boxes in Europe would take the trouble to do it for themselves without the pit and gallery. Understand, I am not saying that we have a greater regard for personal right in general than they have in England; we have shown ourselves more careless about it, whatever our principles, and our feeling in the matter has simply grown with the modern political growth of the English-speaking world. But we have applied these principles to the theater, and England has not.

The result of all this is curious in one respect: an absolute dead failure in New-York is the most ghastly form of failure known in the world. It is the most condensed form of silent contempt I am acquainted with—sometimes not even silent, for it takes the form of good-natured applause. The most complete failure I ever saw in New-York was at the old Fifth Avenue Theater. The audience called up the curtain after each act in compliment to the actors, who were doing their best, and only one-quarter of the audience was left to hear the last act. The play was by a dear personal friend of mine, and I went into the lobby during each entr'acte as sections of the audience were walking out of the theater to listen to people's comments. During the entire evening I did not hear the play mentioned.

The next worst failure that came under my notice was at the Standard Theater, now known as the Manhattan. It was the manager's first experience in New-York. The play was so bad that it interested the audience as something unique, and they remained until the end, always hoping to get something worse. Without any sign of general laughter and with the utmost decorum, they called vigorously for the author when the curtain fell. The manager appeared, apologized for the author's absence and thanked the audience profusely and sincerely for their reception of the play. The next day the manager was the most astonished man in New-York and so expressed himself, for there were not a dozen seats sold for the second night.



As a contrast to the position of that manager I remember the attitude of Lester Wallack and Dion Boucicault in the case of a failure. Boucicault the author, always shrewd, recognized the failure long before the end of the play and walked out of the theater, leaving his friend Lester to acknowledge the applause. Lester Wallack